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THE WILD ASS OF KUTCH.

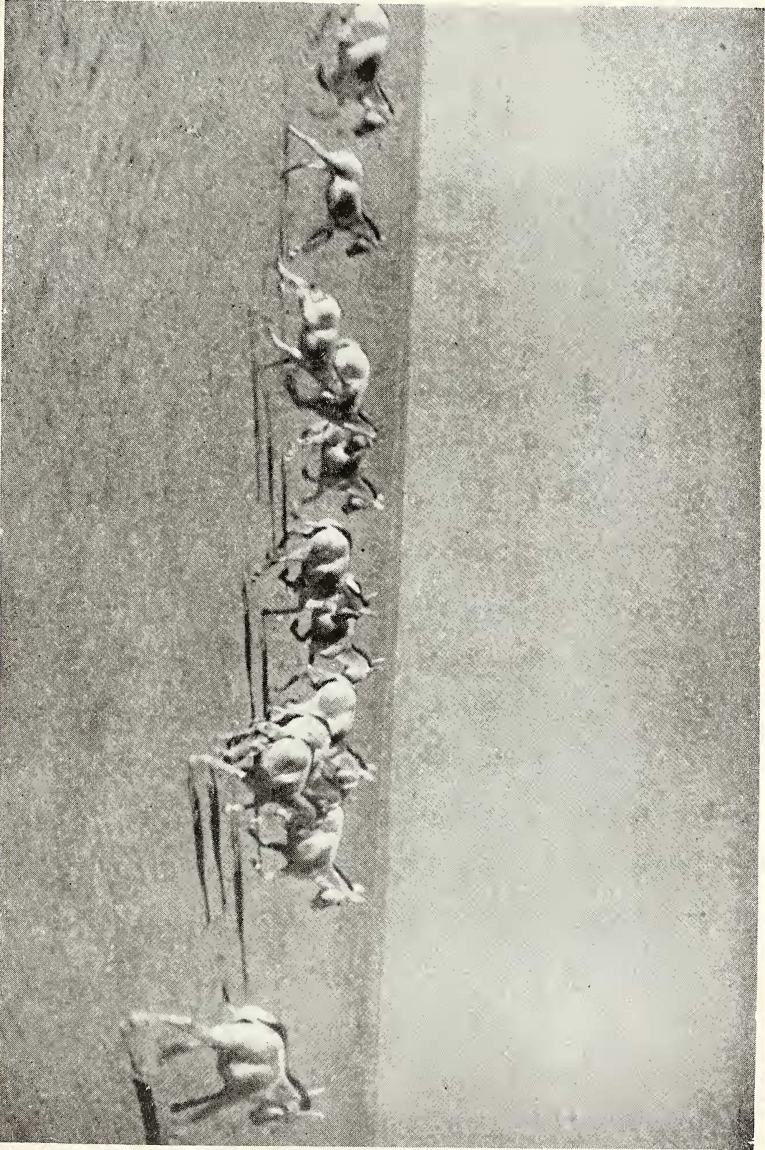
BY

SALIM ALI.

(With 2 plates).

Apparently little is on record concerning the taxonomy and bionomics of the wild ass that inhabits the Little Rann of Kutch. Mr. R. I. Pocock, who is revising the Mammalia volumes in the Fauna of British India series, found difficulty in assigning the precise relationship of this species to the Wild Asses of Baluchistan and Persia owing to the lack of suitable material in the British Museum for a critical examination. He asked the Society if they could obtain fresh specimens for the purpose. His Highness Maharao Shri Vijayarajji, whose patronage of Natural History is so well known, offered with his accustomed generosity to provide all facilities to any expedition the Society might send up to investigate the life history of the wild ass in his territory. The following notes, scrappy as they are, were made during my short camp on Pung Bēt in the Little Rann of Kutch between 24 February and 3 March 1946, principally in order to procure the desired specimens. They are partly from personal observation, but largely from

THE WILD ASS OF KUTCH.



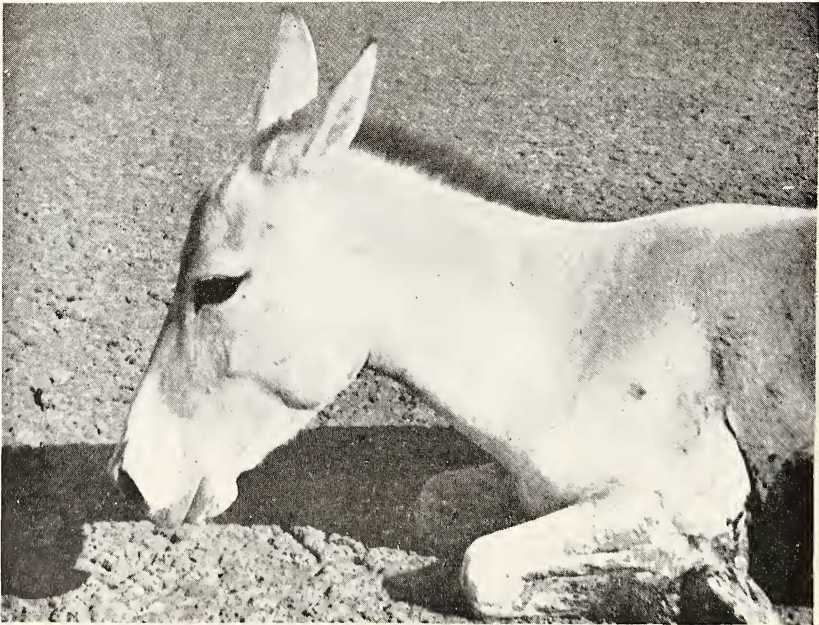
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Wild Asses on the Rann.

Sahib Ali.



A rough and ready method of weighment.



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Close-up of wounded female.

Sálim Ali.

a sifting of local evidence which, on the whole, I considered to be trustworthy.

Habitat and Locality Factors.—Pūng Bēt (lat. $23^{\circ}30'N \times 71^{\circ}15'E$), the headquarters of the Kutch Wild Ass as it may be called, is an irregular shaped flat, sandy, grass-covered 'island' in the Little Rann, about 8 miles long (NE-SW) and 2 miles at its widest part. It lies 18-20 miles WSW of Ādesar in Kutch. Other similar *bēts* or islands in the neighbourhood are: Dhūtari Māta (in Rādhānpūr territory), Sāntalpūr, Shedwa, Mērdhak, Kesmari, and a number of smaller ones. All these are within the present range and habitation of the wild ass, roughly between lat. $23^{\circ}7'N$ and $23^{\circ}45'N \times 72^{\circ}$ to $72^{\circ}42'E$. They are included in an area of about 40 miles by 20, or 800 square miles. The *bēts* actually are the gradual accumulations of sand and silt brought down by the Banās River which enters the Little Rann in a south-westerly direction, about 12 miles NE of Pūng Bēt, and sprawls out over the pancake Rann as a vast expanse of shallow water of variable width. It is several miles wide in places, depending upon season, but scarcely ever more than 2 ft. deep anywhere, usually only a few inches. The water is brackish due to the seasonal extension inland of the Gulf of Kutch and its mingling with the waters of the Banās. Thus, when dry, the hard surface of the Rann is covered with a fine saline encrustation.

As soon as these sandy accumulations have risen barely a few inches above the level of normal monsoon inundation, the foremost plant colonists make their appearance: the "Lāna" (*Salsola*) and the scraggy "Khārio" grass (*Ælurops villosus*). Ecological succession duly follows, and on the higher and older portions of the *bēts* is found a fairly luxuriant growth of several species of grasses, some of which furnish the chief food of the wild ass.

Further inland from the edge of Pūng Bēt, Babūl (*Acacia arabica*) has established itself and appears to be increasing. As yet there are only scattered groves, here and there, of small or medium sized trees around shallow natural depressions banded by the Forest Department. These fill up to form miniature tanks during the rainy season and help to conserve some moisture.

Numbers and Population of Wild Asses.—I estimated that the population of asses within a 5-mile radius of Pūng Bēt at the time of my visit was about 200 animals. As the Banās waters dry up, leaving the Rann arid, and the grass on Pūng and other *bēts* becomes exhausted (after about the middle of March) the asses shift to 2 other *bēts* viz. Vāchhda (Rādhānpūr territory) and Jhilandan (Jhinjūwāda Jāgir). The latter is about 12 miles distant from Khārāghōda in Ahmedābād District. On these *bēts* or 'islands' there is perennial water and some green grass to be had all the year, and the concentrations of wild asses here at the end of the pre-monsoon season (as also in drought years) are said to be enormous.

In the rains when the Little Rann is again inundated and fresh pasture available on the islands, aggregations of over 500 animals are said to be based on Pūng Bēt whence they wander across freely to the neighbouring *bēts*. They are said to be abundant over the

entire area as above defined, one fairly reliable and allegedly conservative estimate putting them down as between 3000 and 5000 individuals. According to local testimony the general population is increasing year by year.

Breeding.—Copulation takes place in August/September/October. A mare on heat separates from the troop with a stallion who fights viciously with interlopers for possession, the combatants rearing up on their hindlegs using hoof and jaw. After a few (?) days of isolation the couple rejoin the herd, and thereafter the female actively resists advances by other stallions. The period of gestation is 11 months. Foals (only a single) are dropped July/August/September. Until the foal is about 3 months old the sexes live apart in separate herds, or troops. These particulars seem to be confirmed by the fact that most colts accompanying the mixed troops of adults between 24 February and 3 March were, like Specimen No. 4, estimated to be about 8 months old, and therefore born about July/August. Some may have been up to a month younger. Further, both the adult female specimens—No. 1 & No. 3—were gravid, the former with a female foetus about 6 months old, the latter also with a female foetus about 5 months old.

At the time of my visit there were no very young foals accompanying the troops, but a fair number—about 6 to 8 in every troop of 20 to 30 animals—of colts about 8 (to 12?) months old, and all more or less uniform in size with No. 4. Mares seemed to predominate in the troops.

Enemies.—No epidemics appear to be known among the wild asses. Even severe droughts are tided over by widespread dispersal, and natural predators are practically non-existent. A certain number of young foals may fall a prey to wolves, but the dams are said to defend their young with great pluck and determination. As to humans, few people appear to molest them and they are seldom shot for food or other purposes (the male genitals are believed to possess aphrodisiac properties), except by certain tribes from Sind, and that not extensively. Indeed from the nature of the terrain they inhabit, shooting wild asses except from a motor car cannot be a simple business. Therefore, for the time being at any rate, the wild ass seems fairly safe against any wholesale persecution. Most local castes, even the lowest, will draw the line at ass meat, a prejudice that seems difficult to account for. In view of it however, it may be interesting to record that for the best part of the week spent in their pursuit, I and my party lived largely on the meat of the asses I shot—roasted and curried—and that I found it quite agreeable. To me it tasted very like Blackbuck, and it is certainly no coarser than Nilgai. In the interests of Science it is indeed fortunate that the taboo exists. There is no doubt that otherwise the wild ass would have followed hard on the heels of the Blackbuck which is now all but exterminated in many parts of the Rann and Gūjarāt where it abounded only a few years back.

No wholesale deaths such as caused by an epidemic or drought have been reported. During his 40 years' experience, Chatar Singh, the Forest Guard of Pūng Bēt 'Rakhāl' (or forest reserve) for the last 20 years, whose information generally proved to be

quite reliable, has never come across a dead wild ass, or heard of any save an occasional stallion that has been killed in fight with a rival. That the fights are often bloody is evident from the fact that quite a number of stallions in the troops I met had lost the ends of their tails, often leaving merely a short stump. Several had bits of their ears bitten off as well, and the many old scars on their bodies were doubtless also the result of such encounters. Specimen No. 2—a battle-scarred and aged veteran—had in addition lost one eye.

Food.—The grasses which provide the staple food of the wild ass, in order of preference, are: 1. "Chaklādūn" (*Eragrostis amabilis*), 2. "Khivai" (*Eleusine flagellifera*), 3. "Bharōd" (*Apluda aristata*) and 4. "Jinjvo" (*Andropogon ischiemum*). When paddy, wheat and gram crops are ripening along the edge of the Little Rann, troops of asses invade the fields at night and are said to cause considerable damage. They bite off the formed ears of grain and leave the plants intact.

General habits.—During the daytime the asses mostly roam over the barren expanse of the sun-scorched Rann in troops of 10 to 30 individuals (in one instance over 50!), but also in twos and threes and even solitary as in the case of Specimen No. 2—a very old stallion. They do not appear to mind the mid-day heat (maximum registered 100°F in the shade on 28 Feb.), and never seem to take refuge under the shade of the babūl groves as, from footprints and droppings, the local Blackbuck evidently do. When visiting the *bēts* at dusk to graze—which they leave again for the open by sunrise—they seem to prefer the grassland along the periphery of the islands. At the season of my visit this may partly have been in order to escape the biting day flies which were abundant and troublesome.

On the regular nightly gathering places on the grassy edge of the *bēts* the ground is reduced to bald 'pats' in patches, with the grass trampled flat or worn away. Large quantities of dung are strewn about, and marks where the animals have rolled in the soft loose earth are frequent. Here also are to be seen the 'drag marks' such as I have described in the case of the Tibetan Kyang on p. 396, Vol. 46 of the *Journal*. These are commonly between 5 and 10 feet in length, and one measured over 30 ft. As in Tibet, the locals averred that they were made by an ass (male or female?) dragging one of its hoofs along the surface, but why the animal did so or under what circumstances was unexplained.

The herds keep to the higher and drier portions of the *bēts* during the rains when the Rann is under water. During this season they freely wade across from *bēt* to *bēt*. The young foals can be driven out into the squelchy inundated Rann, easily tired out to a standstill in the soft mud, and then captured. They are readily tamed if taken young, but are apparently recalcitrant and vicious when grown and cannot ordinarily be trained to harness. It will be seen from the measurements of the specimens that full grown animals stand nearly 12 hands at the shoulder—the height of a good sized mule. They are sturdy and fleet of foot, and I feel that